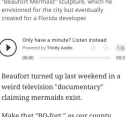


This just in: Mermaids live in Beaufort

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Sculptor Thomas Glover W. with his "Beaufort Mermaid" sculpture, which he envisioned for the city but eventually created for a Florida developer.



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Beaufort turned up last weekend in a weird television "documentary" claiming mermaids exist.

Make that "BO-fort," as our county seat was mispronounced when the Animal Planet network aired "Mermaids: The New Evidence," along with a follow-up to last year's "Monster Week" episode called "Mermaids: The Body Found -- The Extended Cut."

I was not among the 3.6 million viewers last Sunday night, which set a record for the network.

The show included grainy video reportedly shot in 2009 at an indoor holding tank at a naval facility in Beaufort. At the end of the clip, a webbed hand pops onto your television screen.

The "journalist" and "scientists" on the "mockumentary" suggest that the Navy is trying to cover up the existence of mermaids. If you want to believe that, dive right in.

But be advised that, in what may be the saddest commentary on America yet, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration made the following public statement after the first "Mermaid" fake-umentary stirred things up:

"No evidence of aquatic humanoid has ever been found. Why, then, do they occupy the collective unconscious of nearly all seafaring peoples? That's a question best left to historians, philosophers, and anthropologists."

But once upon a time, a mermaid really did trouble the waters of Beaufort.

CAROLINA SNOWBALL

Beaufort City Council passed a resolution a decade ago to invest 1 percent of capital-project costs in public artwork.

When a major restoration project was needed at the Henry C. Chambers Waterfront Park, that meant \$55,000 could go to public art in the park. The Beaufort Public Art Commission cast a net for ideas.

The winning entry was a fantasy mermaid creation. Sculptor Thomas Glover W. of St. Augustine, Fla., proposed a 4-ton stone mermaid and her exotic fishy friends riding a large wave. It would be 14 feet long, nine feet tall and three feet wide.

It won unanimous approval over 14 other entries, though the public art commission did say the mermaid's bare breasts needed to be covered.

But City Council and others didn't like it, even as Thomas Glover W. began to chip away at his original concept. He eventually replaced the mermaid altogether with a white dolphin, like the legendary albino dolphin of Beaufort called Carolina Snowball.

Thomas Glover W. was a highly trained artist, and much of his work was erotic. "Eroticism is a tension between contrary forces," he wrote on his website. "It is a spark and I am a floodplain of gasoline."

But this was not erotic, and he understood the demands of public art. He acknowledged it presents a challenge for all artists. He said controversy and public art "are mated together, angry lovers, always quarreling."

The local quarrel involved tastes, money and whether the public should buy art at all. The public art initiative never fully recovered, and a disappointed and somewhat bitter Thomas Glover W. went away with no commission.

But he said that the second he designed the Beaufort Mermaid, "she breathed life, she held spirit and enchantment, she knew things I didn't."

And he eventually brought the "Beaufort Mermaid" to life when she was commissioned by a developer to grace a waterfall and spill pool fountain at the Harbour Village shopping mall in Jacksonville, Fla.

The artist, born in Italy and adopted by an American couple, died last May of a brain tumor shortly before his 64th birthday. His wife, Marianne Lerbs, also an artist and sculptor, said his dream came true when the city of St. Augustine Beach created a sculpture garden for 16 stone sculptures, half of them created by her husband.

Concerts are held there in winter. And a celebration of the artist's life was held among the statues last September, with a potluck dinner and live music by Lonesome Bert and the Skinny Lizards.

MANY MERMAIDS

Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling remembers the mermaid controversy.

"One swam away, but others came and were accepted," he said.

He's talking about Beaufort's "Big Swim." At about the same time the centerpiece sculpture for the Waterfront Park was rejected, Fiberglass mermaids came to town with a loan from the city. They were decorated by artists, sold to individuals, groups and businesses, and displayed as public art around town.

It was a successful follow-up to earlier visits by decorated cows from Chicago and pigs from Cincinnati.

People accepted the funky art, but it was not all smooth sailing. A cow was set on fire, but resurrected dressed as a firefighter named "Backdraft." A pig named "Big Yellow" was stolen, but later returned, no questions asked.

And a mermaid was stolen from downtown.

"Sadie, the Sea Island Quilter" was last seen at about 3:15 a.m. Sunday by a man who told police he saw the mermaid's arm sticking out of a two-door Honda sedan cruising down Bay Street," The Beaufort Gazette reported in January 2007.

For many years, a bejeweled Fiberglass mermaid looked out over the river in Bellamy Curve. She wore a Santa cap at Christmas.

And waving mermaids who "occupy the collective unconscious of nearly all seafaring peoples" still swim through the thick Lowcountry air at the city's Morrall Park and Logan Park.

Let's not tell the Navy.